

Essay

Initial Intake and Assessment of EAL Learners

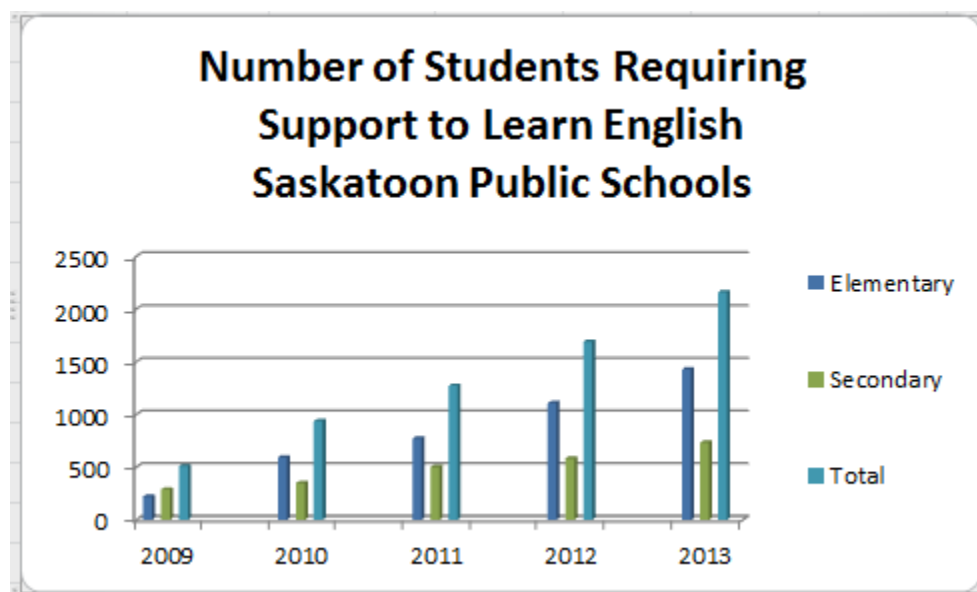
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Context

Saskatchewan, like many other Canadian provinces, has welcomed immigrants throughout its history from around the world. Recently, the provincial government has been encouraging immigration to our province through a program called the Saskatchewan Immigrant Nominee Program (SINP). The SINP is an immigration program under which the Province of Saskatchewan selects individuals from other countries who intend to settle in Saskatchewan and nominates them to the federal government for landed immigrant status. The SINP eligibility criteria reflect the specific needs of Saskatchewan's labour market and economy.

Table 1



As a result of this program and of other types of immigration (refugees, temporary foreign workers, international students), Saskatchewan has seen a rapid rise in population. Consequently, school enrolment has increased at a similar rate with many new students speaking a language at home other than English. English as an additional language (EAL) students

currently make up just under twenty percent of the total school enrolment (September 2013) for Saskatoon Public Schools, a large urban school division in Saskatoon Saskatchewan. Table 1 shows the growth of Saskatoon Public Schools EAL population since 2009.

School Division Perspective

As employees with Saskatoon Public Schools, we have seen rapid change in a short time. In fact, prior to 2009, our roles within the school division (i.e. lead assessment teacher and coordinator of EAL) did not exist. This paper outlines a brief summary of one of the supports that we have put in place in response to the enrolment growth in our schools.

Delivery Model

Along with the growth of the number of students has come a need for more EAL specialists. Currently, Saskatoon Public Schools offers support for all students, grades 1 – 12, who are learning English as an additional language. At the elementary level, EAL support is provided at every school in the form of pull-out (i.e., instruction is provided to small groups of students), push-in (i.e., the EAL teacher supports students within the mainstream classroom), or co-teaching (i.e., the EAL teacher co-plans and delivers instruction with the mainstream teacher). In some cases, the school population dictates a need for a full time EAL teacher. In other locations, the teacher is itinerant, serving students in up to three schools. EAL classes are offered at most high schools, though larger schools with larger populations have a greater number of options for EAL classes. The goal of the English as an additional language program at both elementary and secondary levels is to improve students' cultural and linguistic competency so that they can be successfully integrated into mainstream classrooms. The amount of support provided in the areas of reading, writing, speaking and listening is dependent on the student's language proficiency level and individual need. Both student numbers, and student needs are taken into consideration when making staffing decisions.

Centralized Intake

Given the increasing demand at the school level over the past several years, the school division determined that improved infrastructure and processes were necessary to support newcomer students and schools. One support that was brought forward for consideration was a centralized intake process. During the 2008-09 school year, research on centralized intake in other jurisdictions such as Calgary Public Schools, Louis Riel School Division in Winnipeg, Vancouver School Board, and schools in Prince Edward Island, was undertaken.

The advantages of a centralized intake are multiple. First, it is important to ensure that all families feel welcomed and their questions regarding the school division and the school are answered. This may take additional time for families who are new to the country and for whom English is not the first language. Centralized reception allows for dedicated staff so that families can be welcomed in a relaxed atmosphere. Staff from the centre spend time with families explaining academic programming, transportation options, grade placement, extra-curricular activities, and even appropriate clothing for our winters. Newcomer parents must have the same access to information as other parents, and we cannot make assumptions about what they may know about schooling in Canada. Therefore, a centralized intake process is a solid step towards facilitating smooth transitions for students and families into the school system.

An additional benefit of centralized intake is accurate data collection. Consistent processes for the collection of information such as country of origin, arrival date and legal status verification are increasingly important so that we better understand our newcomer population and plan for their needs. In addition, our provincial Ministry of Education collects this information for funding and tracking purposes.

Initial assessment of a student's language skills is another valuable component of the centralized intake process. By reviewing a student's academic background, and administering assessments in the four skill areas of reading, writing, speaking and listening, baseline data can be recorded and an appropriate educational program for each EAL student can be developed. In the long term, this data can be used to track students' language learning over time. Furthermore, accurate information on numbers and needs of students provides data on which staffing decisions are based.

SPS Newcomer Student Centre

In 2011, the Newcomer Student Centre (NSC) opened to serve newcomer families as well as our school division staff. The goal is to provide consistent and reliable information to both target clients: educators and community members.

For families, the NSC provides a welcoming environment where they can learn about our school system, about EAL programming and about supports for their children, so that the transition to school will be positive.

Through a reception interview, staff collects information on family demographics, languages spoken in the home, immigration status and educational background of the students.

This is valuable information for educators. Further, with the aid of an interpreter as needed, families are made to feel comfortable to ask questions rather than feel intimidated by a form they must attempt to fill out independently at the school (Coehlo, 2004). This information is recorded on the school registration form and on an EAL intake form, shared with the school and entered into the student data system.

As with many parents, immigrant parents are concerned about their children's education. Often, the reason for moving to Canada is to provide better educational opportunities for their children. Therefore, knowing how children and families will be supported is very important to them. They are often relieved to find out that their children will receive support to help them develop their English skills and that they will be placed in a grade with age-appropriate peers. Age-appropriate placement takes into account the research that students are more motivated when placed with groups of age-alike students, as well as guidelines in place in other provinces (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2013; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008).

The next step in our reception process is language assessment, which often begins with a writing sample. When possible, students are asked to write in their first language as an indication of their writing skills. Though perhaps unable to read the sample, the assessment teacher can observe, informally, if the student feels comfortable writing and can get an indication of literacy development in the first language. This initial sample is often used as a springboard to writing in English. In regards to writing topics, Roessingh (2012) points out the importance of designing an appropriate writing prompt. A photo prompt is useful as students do not need any language to understand the task. However, often an essay prompt is used with more advanced high school students. It is important to collect information on students' cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) so that teachers can best support them in the mainstream classroom. Teachers use this information to help EAL students access the outcomes of the provincial curriculum. Therefore, the assessment teacher will choose a prompt appropriate to a student's age, grade, and approximate language ability based on what has been gathered to this point in the reception process.

Once students have produced some language in the writing task, an appropriate reading assessment is administered. This may be as simple as naming letters of the alphabet or as complex as reading grade-level text. In some cases, the assessment teacher will administer a standardized test for reading and vocabulary. We have chosen to use the Gates-MacGinitie

Reading Test (GMRT) as it can be administered in a group setting and would provide desired baseline data in two areas (vocabulary and reading).

During the assessment, students are interviewed using a structured interview protocol. This is done either before or after the reading and writing assessments and is meant to provide classroom and EAL teachers with a verbatim account of the student's spoken language. This will give teachers an idea of the student's fluency and accuracy in spoken English as well as an indication of his or her listening comprehension. Coehlo (2012) gives examples of interview questions that can be adapted to varying levels and ages.

At the completion of the language assessment the intake and assessment form are finalized with details of the student's language skills. The Common Framework of Reference (CFR) is used to benchmark students' proficiency as recommended by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. The CFR was introduced to Saskatchewan teachers in 2012 to "assist educators to identify the language needs of individual students and the pace of instruction" (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 3). Teachers use the CFR benchmark as a starting point for instruction and for EAL support. High school guidance counsellors will also use this benchmark to select classes appropriate for the student. After the initial assessment, students' language learning is regularly monitored by classroom and EAL teachers.

Long-term monitoring of student progress is facilitated by the initial assessment. Further updates of a student's language proficiency are provided twice a year by EAL teachers. This allows us to have relatively current information on students in the event that a student moves to a different school, or leaves the school division.

Ongoing Challenges

One challenge faced at the Newcomer Student Centre is the accurate evaluation of our early learners' academic language. We know that vocabulary levels are key to academic success (Snow, 2006). By looking at vocabulary levels and first language development, we might be able to anticipate where students will need additional supports. However, we currently lack appropriate tools to assess these levels in young students' first language and in English.

Another difficulty that we encounter, both at the Newcomer Student Centre and in schools, is determining appropriate support for students who may have learning challenges. The reasons a student struggles to make progress can include cultural differences, prior experiences such as trauma, or lack of formal schooling. As the Newcomer Student Centre is the first stop for

families and provides student information to schools on students, classroom teachers sometimes expect that we know more about the student than is possible in our initial assessment. Some families will share information about a student's special needs, while other families may not mention anything for fear of losing the opportunity for their child to be educated. In addition to this, once a teacher indicates a concern regarding a student, we must be very careful to collect a variety of detailed data over the course of time. Standardized psychological assessments are culturally biased and challenging linguistically, and therefore, may not provide accurate information. While we have developed guidelines to follow in these cases, there are no simple answers for assessing these special learners.

Future Directions

Processes at the Newcomer Student Centre continue to evolve in response to growing need and increased awareness across the school division. While our assessment practices focus currently on language proficiency, schools are increasingly interested in learning more about students' skills in the content areas (eg. math, sciences). This poses multiple challenges in terms of the capacity of our centre. However, as we strive to support our students and teachers, this may be the next step in the expansion of our services.

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